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The things we want in houses, all changing at Internet speed

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With the housing market clearly up, both in the pace and price of sales, there isn't much new news on the subject. But there are a few intriguing things to discuss. I decided to write on what things people actually want in housing, and how they've changed - fast it turns out. People's desires in housing are changing much more rapidly than ever before. With internet speed, people discover new trends in housing and soon enough want it for themselves. Demographics, technology, new materials, and most recently sustainability have all had fast acting impact on housing preferences. And we cannot underestimate that indefinable thing called taste. The problem is, this is not just redecorating to meet changing tastes and needs. This is often wholesale spatial and structural changes that people want as often and as quickly as fashion changes.

Let's explore a few of the most recent changes. First, after two decades in the 80s and 90s of expanding sizes, suburban McMansions are no longer hot. After a full housing recession, excessively large houses are seen to be just that: excessive. Not only that, but too showy, energy inefficient, and architecturally indistinguishable. The National Association of Builders has verified that over the last several years, new houses have shrunk in size by 15 to 20% on average. With family size shrinking, baby boomers downsizing, and young people with changing needs and locations preferring more temporary housing, small is beautiful once again.

Within this smaller framework, other changes are occurring. Technology has allowed houses to be "smarter," with security, operations, management, all being operated wirelessly and from afar. You can be on vacation, check in on monitoring cameras, change the heat, turn on the lights, watch the neighborhood, all over your smart phone. Smart houses are now a must.

Kitchens continue to be large. They are not only filled with better appliances for efficient cooking, they are laid out for entertaining, verifying what we all know: that is, the party is always in the kitchen. Great rooms attached to kitchens are also still in. Living rooms grow smaller, almost like parlors of old, and dining rooms are indistinguishable except for an occasional chandelier or more formal seating. Outdoor spaces are becoming even more important, and large outdoor cooking areas continue to grow. Better LED lighting, outdoor heaters, flexible screening, glass walls that fold up and disappear, all reflect our desire to have more seamless transition from inside to outside.

In contrast to the demise of large McMansions, some large size oddities still survive: Bathrooms continue to grow larger, emulating spa-like environments; large closets have grown into huge dressing rooms with lounge areas, coffee bars, and televisions; man-caves take on new forms, garages are growing, and significant work-out areas are mandatory. Also, for reasons unclear, billiard rooms, saunas, and wine cellars are out. Who knew?

The take-aways I have from this are a little unnerving. It all points out to me that, like clothing fashion, housing fashion is changing at an ever increasing pace. The problem is a new suit does is it more affordable than a gutted kitchen. What happens to homeowners who, after they make such

sweeping and expensive personal changes, learn in trying to re-sell, that other people don't find the changes as wonderful as they did? And what happens to builders who after a year of permitting, and year of construction reach the market at a time only to learn that their design and amenity package is so "yesterday."

Perhaps for economic reasons, we will all learn to slow down our changing tastes and demands. I am not sure of that though. For me, myself, I still envy that person on vacation who is cleverly managing the house over the smart phone, while others worry about whether the pipes are freezing.

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